The rapid growth of social media influence in world affairs brings huge challenges and opportunities.

As the Syrian army advanced on the remaining ‘rebel’ stronghold in Damascus, the evidence of the Douma ‘chemical attack’ is questioned.

The much-anticipated summit between Kim Jong-Un and Donald Trump has raised questions about the likelihood of North Korea’s denuclearisation.

PROJECT HERO is helping to ensure the future of the Church in Syria through aid distribution.

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**EVIDENCE OF ‘CHEMICAL ATTACK’ QUESTIONED**

By Donnelly McCleland

Rebel fighters in the last area outside Syrian government control near Damascus agreed on Friday [20 April] to withdraw but the army’s bombardment continued pending a full surrender deal, state media and a war monitor reported. The development heralds another advance for President Bashar al-Assad’s push to retake remaining enclaves and strengthen his position around the capital after retaking eastern Ghouta this month. Assad is in his strongest position since early in the seven-year war despite US, British and French air strikes on 14 April – their first coordinated action in the war. (Reuters)

Possible staging of ‘chemical attack’

Russian and Syrian officials vehemently denied the use of chemical weapons and went so far as to claim that the whole ‘chemical attack’ was staged. After Jaish al-Islam surrendered and agreed to be relocated, and outside officials could begin to attempt an investigation, many media outlets screamed “cover-up” before any objective investigation could take place, thereby maintaining control over the dominant narrative concerning Syria. However, this has not deterred some determined investigations on the part of independent journalists (including some from the US and Britain) who are not convinced by flawed arguments of governments and mainstream media houses.

In 2015, Jaish al-Islam paraded their captives (soldiers from the Syrian army, and women and children from the minority Alawite group) in iron cages on the back of flatbed trucks, threatening to place them in positions across Douma in an effort to deter the Syrian army from bombing their positions. And, when they were almost defeated in early April this year, a ‘chemical attack’ was reported from within their area, with social media footage going viral. The international community was quick to accuse the Syrian army of perpetrating the “heinous act” (with Russia accused of being complicit), and before any aspect of the story could be properly verified, the US, France and Britain dispatched missiles against targets said to be chemical weapon manufacturing sites (without a declaration of war against Syria, or consent of their parliaments or congress).

Russian and Western forces fired missiles at ‘chemical weapon’ sites. His footage of Damascus does not show the Douma ‘chemical attack’ before any objective investigation could take up — investigation, many media outlets screamed “cover-up” before any objective investigation could take place, thereby maintaining control over the dominant narrative concerning Syria. However, this has not deterred some determined investigations on the part of independent journalists (including some from the US and Britain) who are not convinced by flawed arguments of governments and mainstream media houses.

Pearson Sharp, of One America News, entered Syria a week after the alleged attack and was in Damascus when Western forces fired missiles at ‘chemical weapon’ sites. His footage of Damascus does not show a people cowed by a ‘butcherer’ leader, but a resilient people determined to live as normal a life as possible under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. He spoke openly with people who did not hate him simply for being American, though they could not understand why the US was “waging war against them”. He then entered Douma, unhindered and without any Syrian or Russian army escort, and proceeded to question people randomly on the street about their experiences on the day of the ‘chemical attack’. No one had seen
**Zimbabwe** will invite Western powers to monitor its national elections for the first time in more than 15 years, official papers showed, ending a ban imposed by veteran former leader Robert Mugabe. The vote, scheduled for July, is seen as a major test for President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s democratic credentials since he came to power in November after a de facto army coup ousted 94-year-old Mugabe.

**Saudi Arabia**’s King Salman met French cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran in Riyadh on Wednesday during the first visit to the kingdom by such a senior Catholic authority, Saudi state news agency SPA reported. It followed a flurry of meetings between senior Saudi figures and representatives of other Christian traditions in recent months, raising hopes of more openness in the kingdom which hosts Islam’s holiest sites but bars the practice of other faiths.

**TERMS OF NORTH KOREA’S DENUCLEARISATION**

BY ANDREW RICHARDS

As a planned summit between Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un approaches, Pyongyang has indicated it would abandon its nuclear programme without requiring American troops to leave the Korean Peninsula. "The North is expressing a will for a complete denuclearisation", South Korean president Moon Jae-in said to reporters. "They have not attached any conditions that the US cannot accept, such as the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea. All they are talking about is the end of hostile policies against North Korea, followed by a guarantee of security". (The Independent)

**LET’S NEGOTIATE**

The prestige associated with the visit of a United States president is a goal that three generations of the Kim dynasty have failed to achieve until now. Although President Donald Trump is not the first to receive an invitation to meet with a North Korean leader, he is the first to accept. Two former US presidents, Carter and Clinton, travelled to North Korea on humanitarian missions to secure the release of US prisoners, but Mr Trump will be the first to sit down with a North Korean leader.

Analysts have warned that the North Korean leadership could use the planned visit as a propaganda tool that could portray the US as the ‘weaker party’, with North Korea having the power to make the world’s most powerful nation come to them. North Korea could be portrayed as a nuclear state able to threaten world leaders (not just a ‘backward hermit kingdom’), but it is unlikely that the US would tolerate this.

The head of the CIA, Mike Pompeo, secretly travelled to North Korea over the Easter weekend to meet with Kim Jong-un, reportedly to prepare the way for a future visit by Mr Trump who is determined to make a deal that would end the conflict between North and South Korea and the nuclear threat that North Korea poses to the US. According to the State Department, Mr Trump’s visit could be as early as June. But is such a deal even possible?

In all the previous negotiations between North Korea and the US (or any other country) concerning the former’s denuclearisation, the North Korean leadership has never conceded to American troops remaining in the South. North Korea has understandable fears that if they were to give up their nuclear weapons – their only viable threat – little would remain to stop US troops moving into the North from the South and ultimately deposing Mr Kim.

**FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

It is deeply concerning that Western governments (often referred to as the “Christian West” due to its legacy of Biblically-influenced governments and constitutions) have, on numerous occasions, pursued war and the violent over-throw of foreign leaders as the first option, rather than the last resort (think of Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and now Syria). It does not seem to help that their decisions have been proven to be ill-advised, or that the results of their decisions have caused irreparable harm to hundreds of thousands of people – they continue to beat the war drums. And because democratic Western governments are supposedly governed “by the people, for the people”, it stands to reason that people in the ‘Christian West’ have authorised such actions, simply by a lack of resistance to the shedding of blood under the guise of a “humanitarian response”. Perhaps it is time for those in the free ‘Christian West’ to question and demand well-reasoned responses (and proper evidence) from their elected governments and their media houses.

PRAY > For the Syrian government and Russian leaders, that they will work towards restoring peace to Syria > For the truth to be revealed concerning the many foreign vested interests in Syria > For Syrian believers to hold on to their hope in Christ and to be shining lights in their communities

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It therefore comes as a surprise that the North Korean leader would concede to the demands of the West, especially after Mr Trump threatened destruction if North Korea continued its nuclear and missile programmes. Analysts are asking what could have brought about such a sharp change of direction, and whether there is any real hope of a new and free North (or even a unified Korea) in the future.

**Future possibilities**

Much of the world’s perceptions of North Korea are negative, based on the limited information available. The nation’s “hermit” status, lack of personal freedoms and limits on travel for their people make it incredibly difficult to develop an accurate assessment of the nation. For millions in the world, North Korea is an enigma, and for decades, the ruling body has used that mystery to build fear – a defence mechanism of sorts, against what they view as a “hostile” world.

But, if these negotiations lead to denuclearisation and a greater openness, the possibilities for the people of North Korea (and the greater peninsula) become endless. The manner in which these negotiations are conducted and the way the North opens up will greatly influence the success thereof, and will dictate whether re-unification might become a reality.

**FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

According to Dr Hyun Sook Foley, Voice of the Martyrs’ Korean president, Christians represented the largest voluntary social group in unified Korea before the Korean War. There were more than 2,000 churches in the country in 1942 – mostly Presbyterian, and mostly in the north. Before the war, Pyongyang (the North Korean capital) was widely known as the ‘Jerusalem of the East’ due to the large number of Christians in the city. But after the 1945 partitioning of the country, the North Korean government attacked the Church through its financial base: in 1946, it confiscated Christians’ finances through the Land Reform Act, and in 1948, nationalised key industries that further weakened churches.

There are many theories why the once-strong Church in North Korea failed to survive Japanese occupation, and later, the cult of the Kim dynasty. Some suggest that the affluence of the Church brought about its downfall, as prominent leaders quickly changed sides in order to keep their riches. However, as with the Church in China, persecution prompted growth within the Church – firstly in maturity, and later in number.

Today, an estimated 40,000 Christians are in forced labour camps and the Church has literally been forced underground. If freedom does come to North Korea, albeit little by little, the growth of Christianity would probably match the growth of that of the Chinese Church when restrictions were loosened after the revolution. Could a visit by Mr Trump be a catalyst in the process of North Korea finding freedom?

**THE FAR-REACHING IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

**Making data work**

The recent Facebook data scandal has caused millions to ask if their personal information on the internet is safe, and if not, in what way it can be used. According to official statements by Cambridge Analytica, the harvested Facebook user information was directly used to sway public opinion towards Donald Trump during his election campaign, and eventually led to his election as president of the United States. Aside from the illegal use of private social media profiles, Russia is accused of ‘hacking’ Donald Trump to victory.

A recent Pew Research study showed that one out of five people change their view on a particular subject because of a post on a friend’s timeline. Darrell West, Vice President and Director at the Brooking Institute, says: “Social media is the ultimate in disruptive technology. They change information delivery, business organisation, online content, news coverage, and the manner in which individuals process new developments. Using social networking outreach tools such as Facebook and Twitter, a number of Democratic and Republican candidates raised money, identified supporters, built electoral coalitions, and brought people in closer touch with the electoral process.”

So here’s a serious question: Are we, the users of social media, so gullible that our opinions can be changed without us knowing they have been shared? (AFP)
Tate concludes that it’s only when Christians walk by the Spirit that social media can be used for good. “Walking by the flesh may be an accepted norm on social media, but it’s not possible to please God in the flesh (Romans 8:8). As believers, we’re called to die to those carnal impulses and walk by the Spirit, perhaps especially on social media, given its reach and impact. We should ask ourselves if our posts are gracious and edifying. Am I slow to speak? Are love and kindness reflected? Am I blessing or cursing those I deem enemies? Even when our posts are grounded in truth, our heart attitude in sharing that truth is key. Is it about anger? Even when our posts are grounded in truth, our heart attitude in sharing that truth is key. Is it about anger? Even when our posts are grounded in truth, our heart attitude in sharing that truth is key. Is it about anger? Even when our posts are grounded in truth, our heart attitude in sharing that truth is key. Is it about anger? Even when our posts are grounded in truth, our heart attitude in sharing that truth is key. Is it about anger? Even when our posts are grounded in truth, our heart attitude in sharing that truth is key. Is it about anger?

—from A Christian Perspective

**From a Christian perspective**

Christian author and guest columnist for John Piper’s Desiring God network, Kim Cash Tate, asks whether Christian behaviour on social media reflects the kind of fruit that Christians should display in a world wanting the opposite. In an article featured on Desiring God, Tate says: “Social media is robust with real-time engagement. Timelines are filled with reaction and raw emotion. Opinions are wielded like swords. Political and popular figures are skewed with apolitics. It’s easy to step into this fast-moving current and get carried by the flesh.”

Tate suggests that carnal desires are responsible for ‘un-Christlike’ behaviour on social media: “Social media enlivens our carnal nature. We enjoy quick satisfaction. Emotion wants an outlet. Complaints must be heard. Anger needs to be expressed. And contrary views must be vigorously opposed, because that’s what the flesh enjoys as well — superiority. It will mow down another’s views — succinctly if on Twitter — while elevating its own, earning a satisfying flurry of shares and retweets. We all know how much the flesh loves validation.”

—from A Christian Perspective

**PRAY** > For greater discernment with regard to news distributed via social media > For believers to be Christ-like in their interactions on social media > For believers to be wise in their use of social media